

IV.
A WEDDING-DRESS
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FOR fifteen years Miss Lena Schwartz had waited for Sam Hilton to get a good job so they could get married. She lived in a quiet boarding-house on Wellsley Street, the only woman among seven boarders. The landlady, Mrs. Mary McNab, did not want woman boarders; the house might get a bad reputation in the neighborhood, but Miss Schwartz had been with her a long time. Miss Schwartz was thirty-two, her hair was straight, her nose turned up a little and she was thin.

Sam got a good job in Windsor and she was going there to marry him. She was glad to think that Sam still wanted to marry her, because he was a Catholic and went to church every Sunday. Sam liked her so much he wrote a cramped homely letter four times a week.

When Miss Schwartz knew definitely that she was going to Windsor, she read part of a letter to Mrs. McNab, who was a plump, tidy woman. The men heard about the letter at the

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table and talked as if Lena were an old maid. "I guess it will really happen to her all right," they said, nudging one another. "The Lord knows she waited long enough."

Miss Schwartz quit work in the millinery shop one afternoon in the middle of February. She was to travel by night, arrive in Windsor early next morning and marry Sam as soon as possible.

That afternoon the down-town streets were slushy and the snow was thick alongside the curb. Miss Schwartz ate a little lunch at a soda fountain, not much because she was excited. She had to do some shopping, buy some flimsy underclothes and a new dress. The dress was important. She wanted it charming enough to be married in and serviceable for wear on Sundays. Sitting on the counter stool she ate slowly and remembered how she had often thought marrying Sam would be a matter of course. His love making had become casual and good-natured in the long time; she could grow old with him and be respected by other women. But now she had a funny aching feeling inside. Her arms and legs seemed almost strange to her.

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Miss Schwartz crossed the road to one of the department stores and was glad she had on her heavy coat with the wide sleeves that made a warm muff. The snow was melting and the sidewalk steaming near the main entrance. She went light-heartedly through the store, buying a little material for a dress on the third floor, a chemise on the fourth floor and curling tongs in the basement. She decided to take a look at the dresses.

She took an elevator to the main floor and got on an escalator because she liked gliding up and looking over the squares of counters, the people in the aisles, and over the rows of white electric globes hanging from the ceiling. She intended to pay about twenty-five dollars for a dress. To the left of the escalators the dresses were displayed on circular racks in orderly rows. She walked on the carpeted floor to one of the racks and a salesgirl lagged on her heels. The girl was young and fair-haired and saucy-looking; she made Miss Schwartz uncomfortable.

"I want a nice dress, blue or brown," she said, "about twenty-five dollars."

The salesgirl mechanically lifted a brown

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dress from the rack. "This is the right shade for you," she said. "Will you try it on?"

Miss Schwartz was disappointed. She had no idea such a plain dress would cost twenty-five dollars. She wanted something to keep alive the tempestuous feeling in her body, something to startle Sam. She had never paid so much for a dress, but Sam liked something fancy. "I don't think I like these," she said. "I wanted something special."

The salesgirl said sarcastically, "Maybe you were thinking of a French dress. Some on the rack in the French room are marked down."

Miss Schwartz moved away automatically. The salesgirl did not bother following her. "Let the old maid look around," she said to herself, following with her eyes the tall commonplace woman in the dark coat and the oddly shaped purple hat as she went into the gray French room. Miss Schwartz stood on a blue pattern on the gray carpet and guardedly fingered a dress on the rack, a black canton crepe dress with a high collar that folded back forming petals of burnt orange. From the hem to the collar was a row of buttons, the sleeves were long with a

narrow orange trimming at the cuff, and there was a wide corded silk girdle. It was marked seventy-five dollars. She liked the feeling it left in the tips of her fingers. She stood alone at the rack, toying with the material, her mind playing with thoughts she guiltily enjoyed. She imagined herself wantonly attractive in the dress, slyly watched by men with bold thoughts as she walked down the street with Sam, who would be nervously excited when he drew her into some corner and put his hands on her shoulders. Her heart began to beat heavily. She wanted to walk out of the room and over to the escalator but could not think clearly. Her fingers were carelessly drawing the dress into her wide coat sleeve, the dress disappearing steadily and finally slipping easily from the hanger, drawn into her wide sleeve.

She left the French room with a guilty feeling of satisfied exhaustion. The escalator carried her down slowly to the main floor. She hugged the parcels and the sleeve containing the dress tight to her breast. On the street-car she started to cry because Sam seemed to have become something remote, drifting away from

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her. She would have gone back with the dress but did not know how to go about it.

When she got to the boarding house she went straight up-stairs and put on the dress as fast as she could, to feel that it belonged to her. The black dress with the burnt orange petals on the high collar was short and loose on her thin figure.

And then the landlady knocked at the door and said that a tall man down-stairs wanted to see her about something important. Mrs. McNab waited for Miss Schwartz to come out of her room.

Miss Schwartz sat on the bed. She felt that if she did not move at once she would not be able to walk down-stairs. She walked down-stairs in the French dress, Mrs. McNab watching her closely. Miss Schwartz saw a man with a wide heavy face and his coat collar buttoned high on his neck complacently watching her. She felt that she might just as well be walking down-stairs in her underclothes; the dress was like something wicked clinging to her legs and her body. "How do you do," she said.

"Put on your hat and coat," he said steadily.

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Miss Schwartz, slightly bewildered, turned stupidly and went up-stairs. She came down a minute later in her coat and hat and went out with the tall man. Mrs. McNab got red in the face when Miss Schwartz offered no word of explanation.

On the street he took her arm and said, "You got the dress on and it won't do any good to talk about it. We'll go over to the station."

"But I have to go to Windsor," she said, "I really have to. It will be all right. You see, I am to be married to-morrow. It's important to Sam."

He would not take her seriously. The street lights made the slippery sidewalks glassy. It was hard to walk evenly.

At the station the sergeant said to the detective, "She might be a bad egg. She's an old maid and they get very foxy."

She tried to explain it clearly and was almost garrulous. The sergeant shrugged his shoulders and said the cells would not hurt her for a night. She started to cry. A policeman led her to a small cell with a plain bed.

Miss Schwartz could not think about being

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in the cell. Her head, heavy at first, got light and she could not consider the matter. The detective who had arrested her gruffly offered to send a wire to Sam.

The policeman on duty during the night thought she was a stupid silly woman because she kept saying over and over, "We were going to be married. Sam liked a body to look real nice. He always said so." The unsatisfied expression in her eyes puzzled the policeman, who said to the sergeant: "She's a bit of a fool, but I guess she was going to get married all right."

At half past nine in the morning they took her from the cell to the police car along with a small wiry man who had been quite drunk the night before, a colored woman who had been keeping a bawdy house, a dispirited fat man arrested for bigamy, and a Chinaman who had been keeping a betting house. She sat stiffly, primly in a corner of the car and could not cry. Snow was falling heavily when the car turned into the city hall courtyard.

Miss Schwartz appeared in the Women's court before a little Jewish magistrate. Her legs seemed to stiffen and fall away when she saw

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Sam's closely cropped head and his big lazy body at a long table before the magistrate. A young man was talking rapidly and confidently to him. The magistrate and the crown attorney were trying to make a joke at each other's expense. The magistrate found the attorney amusing. A court clerk yelled a name, the policeman at the door repeated it and then loudly yelled the name along the hall. The colored woman who had been keeping the bawdy house appeared with her lawyer.

Sam moved over to Miss Schwartz. He found it hard not to cry. She knew that a Salvation Army man was talking to a slightly hard-looking woman about her, and she felt strong and resentful. Sam held her hand but said nothing.

The colored woman went to jail for two months rather than pay a fine of \$200.

"Lena Schwartz," said the clerk. The policeman at the door shouted the name along the hall. The young lawyer who had been talking to Sam told her to stand up while the clerk read the charge. She was scared and her knees were stiff.

"Where is the dress?" asked the magistrate.

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A store detective with a heavy mustache explained that she had it on and told how she had been followed and later on arrested. Everybody looked at her, the dress too short and hanging loosely on her thin body, the burnt orange petals creased and twisted. The magistrate said to himself: "She's an old maid and it doesn't even look nice on her."

"She was to be married to-day," began the young lawyer affably. "She was to be married in this dress," he said and good-humoredly explained that yesterday when she stole it she had become temporarily a kleptomaniac. Mr. Hilton had come up from Windsor and was willing to pay for the dress. It was a case for clemency. "She waited a long time to be married and was not quite sure of herself," he said seriously.

He told Sam to stand up. Sam haltingly explained that she was a good woman, a very good woman. The crown attorney seemed to find Miss Schwartz amusing.

The magistrate scratched away with his pen and then said he would remand Miss Schwartz for sentence if Sam still wanted to marry her and would pay for the dress. Sam could hardly

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say anything. "She will leave the city with you," said the magistrate, "and keep out of the department stores for a year. He saw Miss Schwartz wrinkling her nose and blinking her eyes and added, "Now go out and have a quiet wedding." The magistrate was quite satisfied with himself.

Miss Schwartz, looking a little older than Sam, stood up in her dress that was to make men slyly watch her and straightened the corded silk girdle. It was to be her wedding dress, all right. Sam gravely took her arm and they went out to be quietly married.